

IMPLEMENTING RAISING A READER PLUS



LESSONS LEARNED

from the
**FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
IMPACT PROJECT (FEIP)**



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A growing body of research shows a clear relationship between family engagement and a child's school and life successes. For this reason, schools and communities are actively seeking ways to work together to create coherent learning systems that engage families in multiple settings where children grow and thrive. Often these collaborations seek to utilize programs and strategies that have a proven track record of effectiveness.

Implementing evidence-based programs increases the odds that initiatives will yield the types of outcomes expected. Evidence-based programs – which typically come with materials, training, and technical assistance – are an efficient use of limited resources. Evidence-based programs also give diverse stakeholders within a community a common language and goals to work toward. However, as schools and communities aim to replicate evidence-based models with fidelity, they often struggle as local contexts differ from the conditions in which the original study was conducted.¹

This brief outlines the process and outcomes of five community grantee partnerships that were part of an initiative called the Family Engagement Impact Project (FEIP). As part of the initiative, an enhanced version of Raising A Reader (Raising A Reader Plus), an evidence-based program designed to increase family engagement in children's early literacy and reading development, was implemented. Specifically, this brief highlights the partnerships' successes in implementing the evidence-based model and the challenges faced by practitioners who had to learn to balance model fidelity from an original study with model integrity to address program and family characteristics and local conditions.

About Raising A Reader

Raising A Reader (RAR) is a family engagement and early literacy nonprofit program that helps families develop, practice, and maintain home-based literacy habits and routines. In the RAR model local agencies—including family home daycares, preschools, early elementary school classrooms, housing communities, libraries, playgroups, and home visiting programs—bring weekly bright Red Book Bags filled with award-winning, multi-language books into children's homes. Through orientations and two workshops, families learn family-friendly, research-based, interactive book-sharing techniques which are shown to stimulate cognitive, language, and socio-emotional skills in children.

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3. Evaluation Brief
4. Raising A Reader ✓
5. Supporting Teachers
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Raising A Reader Plus (RAR+) enhances the RAR model by integrating five family workshops—called “Family Nights”—into the RAR model. Each Family Night introduces a specific shared reading strategy, includes direct instruction of the strategy, and provides modeling and opportunities for parents to practice the strategies with their children. A randomized control trial study of RAR+ found the program significantly improved English-speaking children’s oral language skills in comparison to a control group and RAR alone.² However, caution should be taken in applying these results broadly as the Family Night workshop facilitators were well-trained, university-based researchers, and the participating classrooms were all highly resourced. Moreover, the application of these findings to English Language Learners/Dual Language populations is untested.

About the Family Engagement Impact Project and RAR+

The Family Engagement Impact Project (FEIP) was an initiative of the Heising-Simons Foundation that sought to enhance the capacity of communities, professionals, and parents to engage in children’s learning and to improve educational outcomes for low-income, immigrant children from birth through age eight. The FEIP took place in two California counties, San Mateo and Santa Clara, and consisted of three phases: (1) a planning phase (2013), (2) an implementation phase (2014-2016), and (3) a sustainability phase (2016-2017). Multiple grantee partnerships were awarded funds to leverage existing community resources and strengthen public-private partnerships to coordinate and integrate family engagement efforts across organizations.³ Grantee partnerships were allowed to operationalize their initiatives independently and develop strategies to address the needs of the community as they were defined by the grantees. Thus, the mix of strategies and programming used in each of the communities was different. As part of their approach, grantee partnerships were asked to implement at least one evidence-based family engagement intervention selected from a list of 20 interventions. RAR+ was one of the evidence-based options.⁴

During the implementation phase of the FEIP, all five grantee partnerships chose to implement RAR+ as their evidence-based model.⁵ Many of the grantee partnerships had familiarity and prior experience with implementing the traditional version of RAR. Findings from a needs assessment conducted by the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University during the FEIP planning phase may have also influenced grantee partnerships’ selection of RAR+. Specifically, parents surveyed in the needs assessment prioritized opportunities to learn and play together with their children, even as service providers reported a tendency to deliver programming built around parent education or child enrichment with few opportunities for parent and child to learn and play together. Multiple grantee partnerships recognized RAR+ as a model that prioritizes parent-child relationships. Grantee partnerships nested RAR+ within a suite of programs, events, and messages that best spoke to their community needs and goals.

RAR+ Training and Technical Assistance

Grantee partnerships received various forms of training and technical assistance on RAR+.

- Grantee partnerships participated in a standard training offered by the RAR National Office, with a special pull-out session on RAR+ facilitated by a seasoned local RAR coordinator. This coordinator was also available for one-on-one technical assistance to grantee partnerships.
- An FEIP learning community for grantee partnership leads focused in on RAR+ during several of its meetings. Topics included a program introduction, implementation guidance from RAR coordinators, and sustainability tips from the RAR National Office development director. Grantee leaders in turn passed the learned information to local coordinators.
- FEIP grantee partnerships were invited to join BAYRAR, a self-run network of RAR coordinators in the San Francisco Bay Area that meets quarterly to exchange best practices with one another.



FEIP Evaluation Results

During the implementation phase, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. conducted an external evaluation of the FEIP. The evaluation focused on the entire initiative, but also shed light on the implementation and outcomes of RAR+ in particular. The findings are described in more detail in the evaluation report.

FINDING 1: FEIP brings about positive changes for families. Based on surveys with 450 parents who participated in three or more FEIP services, positive changes for families were found in the following areas:

- Parent understanding of and attitudes about family engagement
- Parent perceptions of community coordination
- Parent knowledge of and uptake of family engagement activities
- Quality of home reading

Compared to before the initiative, more FEIP parents after the initiative rated family engagement as very important, reported visiting the library more often, had a home reading routine, had more children's books in their homes, and spent more time looking at books with their children.

FINDING 2: RAR+ is associated with improvements in the quality of parent-child reading behaviors. FEIP parents reported improvements in the quality of parent-child reading behaviors, such as letting children turn pages or choosing what to read, talking about new words, and using voices for different characters. One important indicator of parent-child reading behavior quality—asking children questions while reading together—improved more for RAR+ parents than other parents in the FEIP who did not receive RAR+. This finding is consistent with the intensive focus on dialogic and interactive reading during the Family Nights sessions offered as part of RAR+.

FINDING 3: RAR+ reached a large number of families. During the implementation phase of FEIP, five grantee partnerships reached 1,525 parents in 221 Family Nights, with an average of 17 parents per Family Night event. In RAR book bag rotations, 2,571 children participated, with the majority being in the 3-5 year-old age range.

FINDING 4: RAR+ was implemented differently by the grantee partnerships. Some grantee partnerships implemented the program in a classroom setting while others reached families through family resource centers and community-based programs. Similarly, some grantee partnerships offered the Family Nights workshops in the school setting, while others held the trainings in the public library. Parent volunteers or classroom teachers managed the book rotations, while grantee leads or classroom teachers led the parent workshops.

FINDING 5: Although implementation improved over time, grantee partnerships experienced challenges in implementation fidelity. These challenges included the capacity to conduct all the required components of the program (specifically the Family Night sessions), promote attendance at the Family Night sessions, manage the logistics of translation of materials (such as slides) during the workshops, and use the volunteers. In confronting these real-world challenges, grantee partnerships sought to balance flexibility and integrity by staying as true to the model as possible while accounting for local conditions. Despite these challenges, positive program effects were demonstrated.

FINDING 6: RAR+ offers sustainability potential. Challenges with implementation led to sustainability challenges for many grantee partnerships. However, there were grantee partnerships who were successful in attracting sustainability funding beyond the terms of the FEIP grant. The Masons of California, a major supporter of RAR in the state, chose to support RAR in selected kindergarten classrooms within one district, while two other grantee partnerships could continue implementation of the program through participation in a county-wide, federally-funded program.



Conclusion

The FEIP offers important lessons about balancing model fidelity of evidence-based programs with model integrity and the challenges of addressing local conditions. Within broader multi-pronged community initiatives, program model developers aiming to integrate their programs successfully must consider the impact of local characteristics.

Program Features Matter for Selection of Interventions

In the case of RAR+, several factors may have contributed to its inclusion in the overall menu of services selected by FEIP grantee partnerships: prior familiarity with the program by key partners, an evidence base that satisfied requirements of the funder, ease of implementation that appealed to those delivering services, and a core focus on quality parent-child time that matched the desires of local families. These influences on program selection have implications for program design, evaluation, and marketing, as other model developers look to integrate their interventions into broader efforts.

Effective Implementation Requires Clear Understanding of Program and Participant Characteristics and the Time and Support to Ensure Implementation Fidelity

This may be especially true for new and augmented versions of program models, as with RAR+, and with interventions that are nested in broader efforts like the FEIP. Implementation science suggests four phases of implementation including planning, pre-implementation, implementation, and sustainability.⁶ The pre-implementation phase is often overlooked, but may be of special importance by allowing time for hiring staff, such as RAR+ coordinators and volunteers, and procuring and translating program materials. Although adequate time helps ensure solid staffing and adequate duration of programming, technical assistance and training can increase fidelity of implementation, which can positively influence program outcomes. FEIP grantee partnerships received a variety of supports for RAR+ orientation, implementation, and fundraising; perhaps as a result, their RAR+ implementation fidelity improved from one year to the next. However, there continued to be much room for improvement, so program developers and initiative leads would be wise to build in ongoing supports, especially with peers who are tackling similar efforts, and data and information collection that can inform mid-course corrections within dynamic and complex projects.

Evidence-Based Models May Offer Specific Added Value

Although the evaluation design did not allow for causal certainty, the positive changes in overall parent knowledge, parent behavior, and home-reading environment suggest potential for family engagement initiatives that offer a mix of programs and practices. Compared to parents who didn't receive RAR+, RAR+ parents improved more on one indicator of interactive parent-child reading, pointing to the added value of RAR+ and aligning with the RAR overall program goals. Likewise, by integrating an evidence-based model, grantee partnerships learned lessons about adopting, implementing, and sustaining programs with fidelity.

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1. Fidelity refers to the accuracy or precision with which procedures and models are reproduced. 2. Anthony, J. L., Williams, J. M., Zhang, Z., Landry, S. H., & Dunkelberger, M. J. (2014). Experimental evaluation of the value added by Raising A Reader and supplemental parent training in shared reading. *Early Education and Development*, 25, 493-514. 3. The FEIP supported grantee partnerships (e.g., schools, early childhood groups, and community organizations) in developing opportunities that build the skills of parents and professionals, with a focus on enhancing family engagement at home. In Phase 1 there were six grantee partnerships; in Phase 2 there were five grantee partnerships; and in Phase 3 there were four grantee partnerships. Each grantee partnership identified a "lead partner" who was responsible for managing the grant. 4. All interventions had a family focus as part of or during the entire intervention, concentrated on children between the ages of 0-8, had been found to promote positive educational outcomes, and had evaluation evidence that met standards developed by the What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook (2010). RAR+ inclusion was based on the study conducted by Anthony et al., (2014). 5. One Grantee partnership also chose to implement the National Network of Partnership Schools approach as a second evidence-based model. 6. Halle T., D. Paulsell, S. Dally, A. Douglass, S. Moodie, and A. Metz. (2015) Implementing Parenting Interventions in Early Care and Education Settings: A Guidebook for Implementation. OPRE 2015-94. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services